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SUBJECT: SERBIA: REELECTED PRESIDENT TADIC

Summary

¶1. (U) Serbian President Boris Tadic won reelection, February 3, edging out his Radical Party opponent, Tomislav Nikolic thanks to a large last-minute turnout. Tadic cast the election as a referendum for European integration, economic recovery, and political reform, and a majority of the voters cast ballots for Tadic's vision of Serbia's future -- and out of fear of a return to bad old days offered by Nikolic. Tadic was careful and humble in his acceptance speech, realizing how narrow was his victory. He now faces a badly strained ruling coalition, Kosovo's imminent independence, and a citizenry, nearly half of whom did not choose him. He will need help to pull this off and pull the country together. End summary.

Preliminary Results

¶2. (U) The Serbian National Election Commission (the RIK) called the February 3 presidential election for Democratic Party candidate and incumbent President Boris Tadic. With over 90% of the vote counted, the RIK's preliminary results gave Tadic 50.6% of the vote to Nikolic's 47.7%. Final figures must be public by February 7, and RIK officials expect to release them no earlier than February 6, allowing time for parties to file official complaints of election proceedings. Nikolic's concession speech and the 120,000 votes separating the candidates make such complaints unlikely.

Inauguration Date TBD

¶3. (U) There is no decision yet on the timing of the presidential inauguration. Serbia's Constitution and Law on the President are silent on the matter, and while it has been customary to swear in new presidents two weeks after election, Tadic's office suggests there is more flexibility in the case of a reelected head of state. According to Deputy Chief of Staff Milan Petrovic, Tadic's inauguration might coincide with Serbian State Day on February 15.

Sky-High Turnout; Deeply Divided Electorate

¶4. (U) Approximately 67% of all eligible Serbians turned out to vote in this election, confirming their recognition that the election represented a choice of direction for the country. Tadic won reelection with approximately 2.28 million votes. In his acceptance speech, Tadic told the Serbian people that they had won, and he pledged, as he had throughout the campaign, to lead Serbia toward European integration, to fight corruption, and to work for a better standard of living and economy. Slightly more than 47% of the voters, or about 2.18 million Serbian citizens, however, voted for a change and would have let Nikolic lead the way. Acknowledging the importance of his opponent's performance, Tadic said he intended to meet with Tomislav Nikolic soon.

No Honeymoon

15. (U) Fulfilling Tadic's reform agenda and European perspective is beyond the scope the powers invested in Serbia's presidency, and Tadic will require the cooperation of the Government and parliament to make good on his campaign promises. Despite the Democratic Party's superior numbers in parliament, until this campaign Tadic has allowed Prime Minister Kostunica inordinate authority that his small Democratic Party of Serbia did not justify on the basis of numbers, alone. That Tadic twice defied Kostunica during the campaign (calling the elections before Kosovo declared independence and refusing to sign an annex to the coalition agreement that would annul a stabilization and association agreement with the European Union over Kosovo) and went on to win reelection without DSS help at best may have changed the balance of power within the coalition. At worst, it exposed a ruling coalition whose fractures may prove fatal.

Testing the Coalition

16. (U) The first test of the coalition comes on February 7, when Serbia and the EU are to sign in Brussels what some have dubbed "SAA lite." Deputy Prime Minister Djelic will likely be authorized to sign the agreement that will establish a framework for discussions on relaxed visa requirements, trade, culture, and education. The agreement is an important, symbolic step toward signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union that Tadic announced in the final days of his campaign he would take in a matter of weeks. If he means to deliver on this promise, Tadic will either first have to deliver fugitive indictees of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, especially Gen. Ratko Mladic, or overcome the EU's insistence that he do.

17. (SBU) Taking this step toward Europe and making good on a campaign promise even before his new term in office begins will give

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Tadic necessary bankable credits to deal with Kosovo independence -- the next test of Tadic's presidency. The presidential election campaign unfortunately linked European integration to Kosovo. Nikolic's campaign message insisted that the EU was not Serbia's reward for Kosovo independence; Kostunica demanded, in effect, that Serbia forswear EU membership if the EU acknowledges Kosovo independence; and Tadic swore never to recognize Kosovo. This rhetoric ensures that Serbia will keep the matter in the international courts, even while events on the ground move irreversibly forward. We expect that it also ensures a rocky stretch of road for U.S.-Serbian relations. In conversations with the Ambassador, this fall, the president insinuated that the government would execute reprisals against governments that recognized independence and he urged the United States to be patient and the Ambassador to be in close contact with him to enable the bilateral relationship to survive the difficult time ahead.

18. (SBU) All this could lead to a show-down with Kostunica. Even before the run-off, former foreign minister Goran Svilanovic on January 30 told poloff that some DS members had tried to pressure Kostunica to resign prior to the election for failing to endorse Tadic. Svilanovic said that the DS and DSS would never work together again. The coalition breakup would lead to new parliamentary elections, he said, because it would be impossible to form a democratic government excluding Kostunica, as long as he remained in parliament. In new elections, Svilanovic expected DSS would not rise above the 5% threshold necessary to claim seats in parliament. Others suggested that parliamentary elections might coincide with already scheduled May 11 local and municipal elections.

Truth and Reconciliation

19. (U) That more than two million voters ignored Nikolic's association with the regime responsible for misery, death, and displacement throughout the Balkans exposes a serious vulnerability of Serbian democracy (not to mention a significant failing of the Serbian school curriculum that doesn't even cover the wars). On the

eve of the election, educated Serbs who planned to vote for Tadic tried to convince the DCM that the Serbs had done nothing wrong in Bosnia. Analogous ignorance and denial shapes Serbs' understanding of Kosovo history and informs their passionate self-righteousness in insisting on the territorial integrity of Serbia. President Tadic should exercise his offices to lead Serbia to acknowledge, reconcile, and not forget its past.

Comment

¶10. (U) Tadic needs to shake off his traditional passivity to face a restive electorate, legitimate charges that he tolerates corruption, and the challenges of managing Kosovo's impending independence. We need to help him face up to these challenges and then turn a new page in Serbia's relations with the west. It will take deft coordination with our European allies and long-term commitment in areas such as business and rule of law to make this happen. But thanks to Tadic's victory, we at least have a chance to make this investment in Serbia's future. End comment.

MUNTER